

JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

THE BATTERSEA
BARRICADES
A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

The
Battersea
Barricades

A short story from
The Chronicles of St Mary's

Jodi Taylor

The 10th short story from The Chronicles of St Mary's tells the story of the Battersea Barricades and the people who fought there.

It's not easy being a rebel.

So many new skills to assimilate.

Never mind strategic planning, weapons expertise and the like - there's bicycle-stealing, oil-stain removal and boat steering to be mastered first.

And quickly.

It's the time of the Civil Uprisings and two young women set out to make a difference.

Their only problem?

They don't know where they are.

Or where they're going.

Or what to do when they get there.

Other than that ...

This story is dedicated to heroes everywhere. For many of us, the simple act of getting up in the morning can take nearly all the courage we possess, and actually going on to face the day takes care of the rest. Many people lead what has been described as 'lives of quiet desperation'. They're not called upon to defeat an army or climb a mountain or defy a god, but simply to put one foot in front of the other, to keep going, often with no hope even of respite, let alone a happy ending. Their struggles are personal and private. No one ever makes a movie of their lives. They're not called to Buckingham Palace to receive a medal and they certainly never make the headlines. But they're heroes nevertheless, and this little story, such as it is, is dedicated to every single one of them.

Dramatis Thingummy

Non-Header: Make Kitchen Supremo at St Mary's.

~~Don Elizaiah Shaver~~. Bicycle thief. Motorbike thief. Trainee rebel.

Future grandmother and assistant to Dr Peterson.

Miss Marie Elgistry officer. As per Mrs Shaw, above, excluding the grandmother bit. Future Head of Wardrobe at St Mary's.

~~And her bag textures~~ from Bolivia, together with two potential but confused rebels. Could be a grandmother – who knows?

Nine police officers surprisingly unobservant in the matter of 'textiles' from Bolivia. Very sound on WD40. Probably not a grandmother

Director of St Mary's, organiser of commemorative surprises. Not a grandmother.

He Maxwell History Department. Still struggling with Motherhood 101 and very unlikely to live long enough to achieve grandmother status.

Read Mark the Security Section. Not a grandmother. Marital and paternal status uncertain and not addressed in this tale.

MigStronghaexdMitsvEingoss

Together with members of St Mary's, rebels, soldiers, politicians and other ne'er do wells you wouldn't want hanging around your grandmother. Although, on second thoughts, your grandmother would probably have been there, on the front line, enthusiastically chucking bricks at the authorities. Never underestimate what your grannie got up to when she was younger.

St George killed a fire-breathing dragon. He's the patron saint of England. I don't know why – he was born in Cappadocia, executed in Lydda, and slew the dragon in Silene, which I think is in Libya – but, patron saint of England he is.

Here's another useful nugget of info concerning St George's Day – 23rd April. According to Professor Rapson, if you gather your dandelions on St George's Day then your dandelion wine will be perfect for drinking on Midsummer's Day.

Whether or not that's true, I have no idea. I remember Professor Rapson, standing his fermenting demijohns on the windowsills in R&D and saying, 'Sunlight, Max. You can't get enough of it. For the purposes of wine, that is,' shortly before managing to blow out all the windows five days before 'D-Day'. That's 'Drinking Day', as Miss Lingoss helpfully explained to me while we inspected the wreckage. How five demijohns managed to take out eight windows, two whiteboards and a desk was a bit of a mystery and Miss Lingoss' suggestion that we weaponise the wine and offer it to the Ministry of War was firmly rejected by Dr Bairstow, himself in no good mood after yet another punitive visit from the provisional wing of the Society for the Protection of Historical Buildings – pronounced SPOBE. In vain did I try to raise his spirits by pointing out that, in the future, they would change their name to the Society for the Protection of English Regalia and Monuments, pronounced ... I was instructed to vacate his office forthwith and to take Dr Peterson with me.

That was pretty much the end of the professor's wine-making career. Those of us who had listened in anticipation to the really quite energetic gloop, gloop, gloop of enthusiastic fermentation suffered some disappointment, although, as Peterson pointed out, if it could devastate the entire eastern end of R&D what would it have done to our delicate stomach linings? I should probably mention that this disappointment would have been tempered by enormous relief from the more thoughtful and sensible members of St Mary's if, as Leon said, we had been able to find these thoughtful and sensible members of St Mary's in the first place.

I don't know why I'm maundering on about wine. It has absolutely nothing to do with the story, so, trudging back to St George's Day ...

It was St George's Day at St Mary's. That's the St Mary's Institute of Historical Research. We're located just outside Rushford, although, as Leon often points out, if I don't keep a firm grip on Professor Rapson, Miss Lingoss, Mr Swanson and all the other nutters in R&D, we won't be located here for very much longer. We investigate major historical events in contemporary time. With the professor's wine dripping off

the ceiling and not an unbroken window in sight, now would not be a good moment to call it time travel.

Anyway, returning with dogged determination to St George's Day ... It was St George's Day at St Mary's and most of us were wearing a rose. No, not the same rose, obviously. It's at this point Markham always gives thanks for not being Welsh – as, I suspect, do the Welsh – because he says he would never know where to put his leek. Mr Evans frequently offers to demonstrate. Markham points out that Evans is from Halifax so what does he know, and there's often a bit of a scuffle, resulting in a light blizzard of Deductions From Wages to Pay for Damages Incurred forms dropping from on high.

So – where was I? St George's Day at St Mary's. Done that. Roses. Yes, we've done that, too. Have I mentioned the fire-breathing dragon? As Miss Lingoss had pointed out in the scorched aftermath of that particular trauma – it had been a perfectly legitimate experiment designed to ascertain whether it was possible for a dragon to manufacture and breathe fire without blowing its own head off and yes, all right, shame about the apple tree, but it would probably grow back. Better than ever. Like eucalyptus trees. I'd felt a headache coming on and requested she go and annoy someone else.

Returning yet again to the present – St George's Day – Rosie Lee, my assistant – and trust me, you're far more likely to catch sight of a fire-breathing dragon than of her actually doing any work – had pushed off early. 'It's St George's Day, Max,' as if that was any sort of excuse, and I was alone which, trust me, at St Mary's, is not necessarily a Bad Thing.

I tidied up a bit, dictated two reports and pulled out a copy of next month's assignments to take down to Mrs Enderby in Wardrobe so she could make a start on assembling the costumes.

I knew something was going on outside because, at his request, I'd loaned the entire History Department to Professor Rapson. I could hear voices. Lots of voices. But no screaming. Not yet, anyway. I would investigate later when it was too late for me to be implicated in whatever was about to happen. I grabbed the schedule and trotted around the gallery, down the stairs, through the deserted Great Hall, and into the Wardrobe Department.

The three of them were sitting together at the far end of the room. They were all wearing black with a red rose pinned to their dresses. Mrs Mack had kicked off her shoes and sat with her legs curled underneath her. Mrs Enderby sat primly in her seat, unusually free from the French chalk that was a hazard of her profession, and Mrs Shaw was staring blankly out of the window. They were in a world of their own.

I had forgotten today was their anniversary. I don't know how I

managed that. It's not as if the dates and events hadn't been drummed into us in school. But I had.

I'm going to digress again. Brace yourselves.

Constitutional monarchy. People think because the monarch reigns rather than rules, he or she has no teeth. That's not actually true – something people who think our hereditary monarchy should be replaced by easily bought, corrupt, publicity-seeking criminals with egos the size of a planet, or politicians as they're sometimes known, don't seem to be able to comprehend.

The monarch advises and warns and, because he or she can say no, a wise politician – sorry, just struggling with the unfamiliar use of the words 'wise' and 'politician' in the same sentence – a wise politician ensures they never have to. It's a system that worked well, give or take a few tweaks, until comparatively recently. Until something went wrong. No one knows what. The details are restricted under the Hundred Years Rule and possibly won't be made public even then, because no politician wants the electorate to realise that power actually resides with the people, so no one knows exactly what happened, but something did.

'Constitutional Crisis', shrieked the headlines. Except in the Daily Mail, of course – this was before it was banned – which led with a double page full-colour spread on women in the public eye, highlighting their losing battle with cellulite.

Anyway, it seemed the government either had done or planned to do something even more amazingly stupid than usual. It would probably all have died down eventually, but the old king, an amiable duffer by all accounts and idealistically the polar opposite of then very right-wing government, made a statement. It was comparatively mild – as he was himself – but it flicked the government on the raw. And then, having chucked the royal cat amongst the political pigeons, he went on to make an extremely ill-advised broadcast to the nation, attempting to explain his position and justify his actions. He would have done better to have kept quiet. You could almost hear Edward I, a man who never explained or justified anything in his entire life, turning in his grave.

The government, alarmed by the magnitude of support for the royal point of view, panicked, and assumed what it called Emergency Powers, and what everyone else called Losing the Plot.

Sadly, despite his best efforts, the old king had only succeeded in making things very much worse. He was bundled from the political scene before he could do any more harm and despatched to Scotland – which was being even more than normally fractious – on the grounds that each deserved the other.

There was a great deal of muttering across the country, which

probably wouldn't have come to much because we're British and we mutter all the time, albeit quite politely, but having got the hang of overreacting, the government, aware of what had happened in the US, suspended a few more civil liberties and announced their latest, greatest idea – the possible future introduction of what they liked to call, 'The People's President'.

Once everyone stopped laughing, however, this was discovered to be a very real threat and suddenly people woke up. The thing is – in this country, everything belongs to the Crown and not the government. The police and armed forces swear their oath of allegiance to the monarch and his/her elected government. The courts belong to the monarch. People are detained at His Majesty's pleasure. The laws might be passed by Parliament, but they're upheld by the Royal Courts. The real power of the throne is that it holds no powers itself, but prevents those powers being held by others, which means that, theoretically, the government can't arrest a bunch of dissidents and bundle them into court with instructions to the judge to find them guilty and send them down for twenty years.

Well, obviously, all that was being kicked into touch and people didn't like it. That's not the way we do things. We've chopped people's heads off for less. Politely, of course.

The mutterings increased and in Cardiff, of all places, people channelled Owain Glyn Dŵr and Llewellyn the Great and, for all I know, Ifor the Engine, and took to the streets to voice their opinion of things in general and the government in particular.

And not just in Cardiff. All over Wales they came down from the mountains, climbed out of the valleys and sang at people. Well, no, obviously they didn't, but you get the drift.

The Northern Irish, writhing under the yoke of British oppression – they said – joined in as well, and the Scots, never ones to be late to a party, lined up behind Hadrian's Wall and prepared for the traditional summer pursuits of cattle rustling, maiden-snatching and independence declaring.

I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. And, obviously, it wasn't a spontaneous uprising. None of this happened overnight. It took about a decade for the slow erosion of freedoms and civil liberties to come to a head. It wasn't a case of a single section of society feeling disconnected. Everyone felt disconnected. The government had finally achieved a perfect score because, now, no one was happy. Anyway, inevitably, matters came to a head.

It was a long, hot summer. Tempers frayed, hosepipe bans were imposed, England were kicked out of the first round of the World Cup, beaten 3 - 0 by the People's Republic of Somewhere Or Other, population twenty-five thousand if you included the livestock.

Suddenly a further series of draconian laws hit the statute books, rushed through the Commons on the nod and not allowed anywhere near the House of Lords at any price because some twenty or thirty of the few remaining peers had publicly announced their intention of kicking the Bill up the arse – together with the government it came in on. The House of Lords was quietly ignored and everyone geared themselves up for the Summer of Discontent.

I don't think anyone expected things to escalate quite so quickly or quite so dramatically. Troops were despatched to Cardiff – to ensure public safety, they said, and for the good maintenance of order. Anti-government protesters became out-and-out rebels and took to the streets.

Terrified of losing what control remained, the government tried to tighten its grip and succeeded only in losing it completely. It must have been like clutching at smoke. The tiny town of Thirsk – at no small cost to themselves – publicly declared their support for Cardiff. Additional troops were deployed northwards and we were off.

Violence began to spread across the country like a fringe of fire on lighted newspaper. Pitched battles were fought in the streets. Property was destroyed. Schools and universities closed. Local authorities were disbanded and their powers claimed by the government. Only temporarily, of course. They said. Public gatherings of more than five people were forbidden. Hundreds of people were hurt. Some died. The government issued warning after warning. Additional powers were granted to the police and the military. Habeas corpus was suspended. There were running battles in the streets.

Of course, when law and order breaks down, everything breaks down. The streets weren't safe, even during daylight. There were food riots and power cuts which led to widespread looting. Private scores were settled, and it seemed there was no way of preventing the country from sliding into anarchy and chaos.

The government hit back. Those deemed to be ... less British ... were informed they were no longer welcome. Political dissidents – and there were a lot of them by this time – were rounded up. Snatch squads at dawn became a common event and the rest of the world looked on, appalled, as Britain seemed set to disappear, like Narnia, in fire and water.

There was no one to help. Europe was imploding. No one had a clue what was happening in the US, but according to the few who had made it out, it wasn't good. Russia and China had stopped talking to one another which was generally reckoned to be about the only good news around. Storms, droughts, and floods played havoc across the world. People started to believe that it was the beginning

of the end of the world.

What turned the tide was the return of Princess Mary from Canada. Strictly speaking, she wasn't a princess at all. She'd renounced all that and emigrated to Canada to become a doctor. Refused permission to train or practice in this country, presumably in case some litigious republican tried to sue her for saving his life, she'd told the establishment to go forth and multiply, signed an enormous number of official documents and pushed off to live, as princesses do, happily ever after somewhere else.

They'd welcomed her with open arms in Canada, where she'd made a new life for herself, marrying a palaeontologist with a beard and raising a family – all of whom turned out to be trouble right from the word go. I always think it's good to see the old traditions being carried on by the younger generation.

Anyway, Princess Mary, as the world insisted on calling her, obviously hadn't renounced quite as much as the establishment might have wished. Returning to Wales as an ordinary member of one of the many international medical teams despatched to care for those tragically wounded in recent unfortunate events, she found herself regarded as the natural focus of those wishing to raise the flag and make a stand. It was Henry Bolingbroke at Ravenspur all over again. Except she landed at Cardiff Airport, but you know what I mean.

People flocked to her from all over the country. She was hailed as the nation's saviour. The government went ballistic and attempted to deport her. Cardiff rose up and the streets, almost literally, ran with blood. They fought for the best part of two days. Half of Cardiff was levelled. Street to street fighting became house to house fighting and then room to room fighting.

It was during this dark time that Princess Mary made her famous broadcast, 'Enough is Enough.' She spoke from a derelict bookshop in West Bute Street, her voice sometimes lost in the crackle of static. As a near miss brought part of the ceiling down around her, she called on the people to remember their loyalty to King and country. It's a wonderful speech. (I used the 'Extraordinary people achieve extraordinary things' part myself, when I was caretaker director of St Mary's.) And it worked. They said it was written everywhere – scrawled on walls, on homemade posters in windows, on bumper stickers. 'Enough Is Enough.' And it was. The Fascist forces were thrown out of Cardiff, and, for the government, it was the beginning of the end.

So that's the background to what's known today as the Civil Uprisings. They – whoever they are – think it sounds better than calling it civil war. The fighting was bloody and so was the aftermath – any number of people found it expedient to rethink their political

loyalties – but it was short-lived. More painful was the process of reunification.

Some sort of a government was cobbled together. Bearing in mind that by now most people thought their dog could do a better job than their former Member of Parliament, party lines were temporarily abandoned and the revolutionary idea of appointing the best person for the job, rather than simply rewarding some political crony, was embraced. Interestingly, no one particularly wanted to be prime minister, and it was as if the idea of the People's President had never existed. With some reluctance, Princess Mary undertook to lead a government while making it very clear this was for a period of no more than twelve months – if that – after which full elections would be held. And so, the rebuilding began.

Astonishingly, the best person for the job idea worked. Election time came – all the rules were strictly adhered to – even those concerning expenses and the claiming thereof – and the country found itself with a somewhat nervous and unusually well-behaved government.

The problems didn't go away, of course. There was still massive inequality and poverty and resentment, and there still is today. There probably always will be, but at least now everyone knows what will happen if genuine attempts to rectify the situation are not made.

And here I was, looking at three middle-aged ladies who'd been there. Right on the front line. They never talked about it. I knew they'd all received awards for their roles. Mrs Mack had received a chestful of medals she never wore, but, every year on this day, they, together with Mr Strong, Major Guthrie, Professor Rapson and Dr Dowson, would pin on their roses and attend the local remembrance ceremony at St Stephens.

I was very conscious that I was intruding on a private moment.

'Sorry, Mrs Enderby. It's only the new schedule. I'll leave it on your desk.'

'No, no, come in, Max.'

I closed the door behind me and went to join them.

I'd hardly sat down when the door opened again and Dr Bairstow limped in, bearing two bottles of wine, waving us to stay seated. No one seemed particularly surprised to see him and I wondered if this was a regular thing. A little ritual carefully observed every year. A mark of respect.

Mrs Enderby got up and rummaged in a cupboard for glasses. Judging by the clinking, they seemed to have a good supply. I made a mental note to investigate in the near future because, in theory, Wardrobe was supposed to be part of my remit. She passed them round, together with a corkscrew, and Mrs Mack opened the wine.

We stood for the toast.

‘For those not here today.’

We nodded solemnly, clinked our glasses and drank.

I would have gone away. They weren’t making me feel as if I was intruding, but this was a private moment. Their private moment. On the other hand, I didn’t want to appear rude, so I decided I’d drink my wine as quickly as was polite and quietly leave them to it. And there was something going on outside that I really should investigate because it’s never a good idea to leave my department unsupervised for too long.

I drained my glass, set it down and prepared to get to my feet. Mrs Mack immediately topped it up again. It would seem I was to stay.

Mrs Shaw said something I didn’t catch and Mrs Enderby shook her head.

‘All those years ago. Who’d have thought?’

‘Well, not me,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘With everything that happened, I never thought I’d survive. I never knew whether I was going to be blown up, drowned, arrested, executed, shot ...’

‘Me neither,’ said Mrs Shaw. ‘Thought you would survive, I mean.’

‘I can’t believe any of us did,’ said Mrs Mack. ‘The whole thing was a scrambling shambles from start to finish.’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Enderby comfortably. ‘We’re British. That’s how we do things. We leave efficiency and organisation to other nations. We stick with what we know.’

‘A shambles?’ I said. ‘In what way? In school we learned about Cardiff, and what they did at Thirsk and then the Barricades. It was all over in less than three weeks, wasn’t it?’

‘It was,’ she said grimly. ‘And just as well because we were finished. It was just good luck, really ...’ she tailed away.

Dr Bairstow set down his glass. ‘With the greatest respect, I really must dispute that statement. Yes, you were lucky, no one would argue with that. Every winning side has more than its fair share of luck, but you had more than that. You had purpose. A burning purpose. You believed in what you were doing. You all did. And it was that belief that carried you through. Possibly, the same could not be said for some of the government forces.’

‘It might have been for Theresa here,’ said Mrs Enderby tartly. ‘Some of us struggled a little.’

Mrs Shaw shrugged. ‘It’s not Theresa’s fault the pub fell on you. Or that we got involved with that weird woman. And if you will go stealing bicycles ...’

‘Really?’ I said, interested, because, of course, the best stuff is never in the history books. ‘Tell me.’

Mrs Mack sat back and gestured to the other two. ‘You go first.’

‘Well, I will,’ said Mrs Enderby, with dignity. ‘And possibly it’s not quite how we should have done it, but it’s the way we did do it and, as I always say, it’s the winning that’s important, not the taking part.’

‘Hear, hear,’ I said, raising my glass to her, pleased to find someone else shared my point of view.

She topped up her wine and began.

‘Well, I started off in Oxford,’ she said, ‘distributing supplies across the country.’

‘Were you a rebel?’

‘I would have liked to have been. A lot of us wished we were, but we had families to think of. I was married then, and so was Theresa, of course.’

‘Did you all know each other?’

‘Not then,’ said Mrs Shaw. ‘Mavis and I met at Gloucester.’

‘I’d never fired a gun,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘Or been fired at. I wasn’t even sure what I was doing there. I’d studied design at college and somehow found myself in logistics and communications.’

‘You were with the government forces?’ I said, surprised.

‘Not quite. I was with the old Civil Service. They were trying to pretend none of this was anything to do with them and their primary function was to keep the country running. That’s what a lot of us told ourselves. Anyway, I wasn’t there that long. From Oxford, I was posted to the big storage depots near the Severn Tunnel. I was there when they blew it up. That was quite an exciting night, I can tell you.’ She stared accusingly at Mrs Mack.

‘Nothing to do with me,’ said Mrs Mack calmly. ‘I was in Cardiff.’

‘Well, after that, I think I was posted to Cirencester ... but I never got there.’

‘Just as well,’ said Mrs Shaw scornfully. ‘I keep telling you they’d never have let you in. They’re quite posh in Cirencester.’

Mrs Enderby ignored them. ‘... but I think I got on the wrong transport or they mixed up my orders or something, and I finished up in Gloucester. I joined the logistics team. I was based down in the docks, dealing with the stuff coming up the Sharpness Canal to be unloaded at Gloucester.’

‘Were you top-slicing?’ asked Dr Bairstow.

‘Of course.’

‘Top-slicing?’ I said.

‘Top-slicing and skimming,’ she said. ‘For the cause. I’d discreetly put one or two boxes of ... stuff ... to one side and, would you believe it, while my back was turned some thieving tow rag would have it away and, the next moment, it was halfway across the country and I’d have to mark the paperwork as “lost” or “damaged in transit”.’

‘Where would it go?’

‘I never asked. Wherever it was needed, presumably. East to London. West to Wales. North to Thirsk and beyond.’

She sighed. ‘We had to be careful, of course. There were plenty of spot checks and snap audits. And the place was full of nasty little people who’d grass you up for a month’s extra rations. I did what I could, but it wasn’t enough. Nothing like enough. And even when we’d smuggled it out, there were the roadblocks and inspections and government patrols and so on, but some of the stuff got through. Enough to keep people going, anyway.’

She sipped her wine. ‘And it wasn’t just supplies. There was human cargo as well. People were smuggled in and out. I’d be ticking things off and a tarpaulin would bulge and some poor bedraggled soul would emerge, croak, ‘Gloucester?’ and I’d nod and blink and by the time I looked again, they’d been spirited away. I learned never to ask any questions.’

‘We ...’ she nodded towards Mrs Shaw, ‘were billeted in Herbert Warehouse. It was pretty awful inside, but at least we had a roof over our heads.’

‘Oh, we didn’t do too badly,’ said Mrs Shaw. ‘We had a bed, a locker and two chairs.’

Mrs Enderby grinned. ‘One of the chairs disappeared almost immediately – we never found out where – and we chopped the other one up for firewood. And the locker went the week after that. It didn’t matter because we didn’t have much to put in it anyway. None of us had much in those days.’

‘I always remember the cold,’ said Mrs Shaw. ‘We had a space heater but it didn’t work very well and there wasn’t always any power anyway.’ She laughed. ‘We tried building a fire, once. We lit it and tried to persuade the smoke to go out of the window and then discovered, too late, that it was a sealed unit, so that didn’t work.’

‘I remember that,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘Everything stank of smoke for weeks afterwards.’

They were laughing but when you think about it, it’s not that funny. These days, they had the benefit of hindsight. They knew that everything would eventually turn out well, but they couldn’t have known that at the time. How cold must you be to set fire to your furniture? Had they laughed about it then? I imagined Mrs Enderby, wearing as many clothes as she could find, standing, shivering in the biting wind, checking off supplies as the cold, scummy water slapped around the bobbing boats. Risking her liberty – if not her life – every time she ‘lost’ another piece of cargo. And to be so cold that you would set fire to anything that would burn, regardless of its function. Without heat you can’t dry your shoes or your clothes. You get

chilblains. Your clothes become damp and mouldy. And you get colder and colder until one day it's just not worth struggling any longer. I've been there – I know.

'It wasn't just us, though, was it?' said Mrs Enderby. 'Things were falling apart for everyone. Yes, we were cold, isolated, hungry, and lacking even basic amenities, but the government forces weren't much better off. Except for the leaders, of course, because they always make sure they're all right, don't they? But for the people on the ground – well, there were all sorts of rumours about mass desertions. And subsequent executions. Everything was falling apart. It was just a case of who could hold out the longest.'

'And,' said Mrs Shaw, 'no one knew what was happening anywhere else. That's what I meant when I said isolated. There was no internet, no TV, hardly any radio. There were pirate stations, of course, but you certainly couldn't trust everything they said, so we just kept our heads down and got on with it.'

Mrs Enderby accepted a top up. 'We didn't see much of each other – Elizabeth was on nights and I was on days – hence only the one bed between us. We worked seven days or nights a week, which wasn't much of a hardship really, because there wasn't anywhere else to go or anything else to do. Gloucester was in a dreadful state, broken down, dirty, stinking – every doorway was stuffed full of displaced people and it was a long and bitter winter that year. We took them mugs of tea and sandwiches when we could. Bread, cheap spread and jam usually, but what more could we do? We weren't much better off ourselves.'

'And then, one bitterly cold day, I was down at the docks, supervising a barge unloading. I had a few motor vehicles lined up to take things away, but the majority of the vehicles were horse-drawn. Fuel was only for the military. Anyway, this day, right out of the blue, there was a stir. Suddenly, people were running around all over the place, waving their arms and shouting. There was news from Cardiff. They'd won. They'd prevailed over the government forces and actually chucked them out of Cardiff. Well, not so much chucked them out – the government was calling it an "ordered retreat" back to London, but it was a victory all the same. And when everyone least expected it. I can't tell you how it lifted my spirits. I think that was the moment I finally made up my mind that I was going to see things through. I was going to fight. Because now, suddenly, everyone was coming our way. The race was on to get to London first and I was going to go with them.'

She paused and looked around. 'It was time for everyone to do what they could and I was going to do it in London. There was a small group of rebels at Chepstow, a rear guard, engaging the

government forces and trying to buy us time to get ready. The real rebels, that's Theresa's lot,' she nodded at Mrs Mack, 'had disabled the Severn Bridges and the tunnel had gone, which made Gloucester the lowest bridging point on the Severn. From Gloucester, we weren't sure if the government forces would head for the supply depots at Oxford – not a good move, Fascists and students are never a happy mix – or press straight on to London. Whichever it was, they'd be crossing at Gloucester. Suddenly, everyone was declaring for the rebels and vowing to hold the government forces here to try to give Theresa's lot enough time to get to London first. The race was on because, obviously, whoever controls London controls the country.

'Our tiny local garrison had already fled. Civilians were being urged to get out and I'm sure they would have, but they had nowhere to go. It looked as if Gloucester was to be defended by a rag-tag bunch of volunteers because anyone with any military expertise or combat experience, whether for or against the government – they were all on their way to London. We were on our own.'

She smiled. 'Suddenly, I wasn't quite as brave as I'd been half an hour before. We did what we could to prepare, but it wasn't much. We were only logistics and communications – not a combat unit. And most of us were female.'

'Or elderly,' added Mrs Mack.

Mrs Shaw nodded. 'I was in the old telephone exchange. In one of the underground rooms there. Codebreaking. And some other stuff.'

I was curious. 'What other stuff?'

She was vague. Deliberately so, I think. 'Oh, you know, misdirecting messages. Changing a word here or there. Generally getting things wrong because, of course, I was just a little flibbertigibbet girl who didn't know any better.'

She turned back to me. 'Anyway, we had to do something, so we thought we'd block off the main road. We assembled everything we could find that we thought might be useful. It was amazing. People dragged out their furniture. They brought it down on carts and then when they were unloaded, they turned the carts over as well. There were burned-out cars, old freezers, filing cabinets, a couple of washing machines ...'

'There was that old bus, as well,' said Mrs Enderby.

'Yes, I'd forgotten that. Anyway, we heaved, dragged or rammed it all into place and prepared to make a fight of it. We closed off the bottom of Westgate Street as best we could while everything was evacuated behind us. Everyone was running around and shouting. There was panic in the air. I don't know why. The government forces had Chepstow to get past before they would arrive at Gloucester and we had lookouts and scouts watching the roads.

‘Our Cardiff forces arrived the next day. Chepstow had fallen. They fought almost to the last person there, you know. We kept the barricades open for our people, urging them through because the government forces were hard on their heels. There were people clinging to vehicles or piled onto old buses. There were ancient pieces of artillery bumping along behind equally ancient vehicles. Liberated from museums, we thought, although whether they would even fire was anyone’s guess. And if they did fire would they be more dangerous to those behind them or in front? We cheered them through anyway. I remember jumping up and down and waving as they went past.’

Mrs Shaw said quietly, ‘Do you remember that old man?’

‘I do.’ Mrs Enderby turned to me. ‘There was an old man on the corner. Standing on the roof of a burnt-out car. He saluted as they went past.’

‘I saw him,’ said Mrs Mack quietly. ‘I waved to him.’

‘And I saw you,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘I actually saw you come through. You were in a Land Rover and you roared past in a convoy heading up towards the Cross. You didn’t see me but I saw you.’

‘I remember that,’ said Mrs Mack. ‘Trevor was driving.’

‘He was,’ said Mrs Enderby quietly. ‘He nearly hit that pile of sandbags outside Shire Hall.’

Mrs Mack grinned suddenly. ‘I didn’t say he was a good driver.’

‘He wasn’t, was he?’

Mrs Enderby continued. ‘Anyway, we were all at the barricade, screaming at people, refugees from the fighting, people on their way to London – everyone – to get a move on because we could hear the government forces coming. We could hear their engines in the distance and we had to get the barricade closed. A group of us ran out and grabbed the last bunch and dragged them through. They were mostly women and children. Exhausted and terrified out of their wits.’

‘They were rebuilding the barricades as we squeezed through. I wasn’t on the front line so I was charged with marshalling the refugees through town. Some were just too spent to go any further, so we bundled them down alleyways and into doorways and went back to Westgate Street.’

She fell silent and sipped her wine.

Mrs Shaw sighed. ‘It wasn’t anything heroic. It wasn’t a famous last stand. It certainly wasn’t the Spartans holding Thermopylae against the Persians. All the military people were on their way to London. It was just us. A bunch of mostly civilians, all of us scared to death, knowing we couldn’t win and that we’d be lucky to make it through the day. Or even the next hour.’

She stared again at her wine. ‘There was no gunfire. Not at first. I think they thought they could just smash their way through. That we wouldn’t put up any sort of resistance.’

Mrs Enderby nodded. ‘We’d made sure that everywhere was blocked solid – Westgate Street was the only way for them to go and that was where we were waiting for them. They roared across the bridge and that turned out to be a huge mistake. We’d laid out homemade stingers and the front wave swerved and crashed into the barricades, which held, thank God, and now they were in trouble because there were any number of dead vehicles between them and us, and a couple of Molotov cocktails soon made that a very unhealthy place to be.

‘They still weren’t shooting – I don’t care what anyone says, soldiers hate firing on their own people – and when you’ve got civil uprisings on your hands who’s to say you’re not shooting at Great Aunt Ethel or Cousin William and your mum’s going to give you hell for the rest of your life. So they held off for long enough for us to regroup behind the barricades and wait. After all, we were in no rush. The longer it took, the better.

‘Eventually, I think they realised this. Some brave soul climbed onto a truck somewhere and read the Riot Act. There was a moment’s silence and then all hell broke loose.

‘They started with the lights – it was dark by now – bright, white dazzling lights that made us blind to what was happening behind them.

‘They had everything, of course, including RPGs which made short work of our barricades, I can tell you. Then the buildings on either side came crashing down and we had to run for it. There were explosions and fires everywhere making everything as bright as day. And then they broke through, bulldozing and crushing everything before them. They drove straight over the barriers we’d been so proud of. We had no choice but to fall back. Well, actually, we ran.

‘I remember I was so angry we hadn’t been able to do more. Three hours we’d held them. Four at the most. Not even a single night. I was crying with rage. People were dying and we’d achieved nothing. Nothing at all. After everything they’d done in Cardiff. And Chepstow. And it was all falling apart in Gloucester.’

There was complete silence in the room. I couldn’t have moved to save my life. All these years I’d kidded myself I was a big, bold, bad historian and that what I did was important, and here I was in the presence of three perfectly ordinary women whom you would hardly notice in the street but who had achieved more in three weeks than I would in my entire lifetime. Their action – their courage – was the reason I’d had the opportunity to live the life of my choosing. They’d

really made a difference.

Mrs Shaw continued. 'The word had gone out to fall back to College Green, so we did. The cathedral was just a huge shadow in the darkness but the bishop was there and she'd organised her people. We deployed as best we could and waited. I'd been issued with a small handgun and some ammunition and told to make it count.'

She swallowed. 'I'd never actually killed anyone before and I wasn't sure I could do it now. I was crouching in the dark, trying to be brave when Mavis appeared beside me. I didn't recognise her at first. You were in rather a state, dear.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Mrs Enderby. 'I'd been inside the Dick.'

It takes a lot to faze Dr Bairstow. True, his hand paused for one infinitesimal moment as he reached for his glass of wine, but the light wasn't good and I might have been mistaken.

There was a thoughtful silence.

'The Dick Whittington pub.'

'Ah,' we said, in some relief.

'It was blown up.'

'I never understood how you escaped,' said Mrs Shaw.

'I was under the table.'

'And not for the first time, dear.'

'The whole top floor came down on top of me,' she said in some indignation.

'I remember you saying,' said Mrs Shaw. 'You were rather cross.'

'Well, I was. Good people were dying and all those lovely old buildings were coming down. The Fleece had stood on that site since the 15th century and it was destroyed in minutes. I know it was bad in Cardiff and London, and in Thirsk, too, but to me, that night, it was as if civilisation was coming to an end for all of us.'

She sat back, her gaze unfocused, staring back through time at her memories.

'We crouched in the dark. I was shivering with cold and fear. I could hear the crack and flash of explosives. The crump of falling buildings. From where I was, I couldn't see a thing. Which, somehow, made things worse. Most of the people I knew and worked with were with us, behind the line, but a few had remained behind in Westgate Street. As a rear guard.' She shook her head sadly. 'None of them made it out.'

There was a long silence.

Mrs Shaw roused herself.

'The order went out. This was it. Civilians and non-essential personnel were to evacuate. We were both, of course, and anyone could see Gloucester didn't have long. We could have moved south-

west to the comparative safety of Devon or Cornwall but I don't think there was ever any question of that, was there, dear?'

Mrs Enderby shook her head. 'Never entered my mind. I wanted to see it through to the end. I was terrified and determined all at the same time. Whichever way things went – I wanted to be there. And, quite honestly, if things went as badly as I expected, then I wasn't sure I wanted to be around for the sort of country we would become. So – London it was, and off we set.'

She drank her wine. 'Initially, I didn't think we were going to get out of Gloucester. We thought we'd head for the railway station. They'd held the last trains for the survivors but word went out they were leaving. Right then. We were determined to be on one of them. And so, apparently, was everyone else. The bus station wasn't any better. Hundreds of people milling around in all directions and not a bus in sight.'

'Yes, but it was always like that anyway,' objected Mrs Enderby. 'What with the fuel shortages, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen a bus. One that wasn't a burned-out shell or part of a barricade, that is.'

'But, unbelievably, there were trains,' said Mrs Shaw. 'Two of them waiting – dreadful old diesels throbbing out black smoke everywhere. The one on the far platform was heading north – to Birmingham, York and so on, taking people up to Thirsk. The one nearest to us was the London train. The platforms were heaving with people trying to fight their way on board one or other of them. Marshalls were blowing whistles and shoving people in the right direction and threatening to shoot anyone who argued. The crowds for the London train were slightly lighter, which we thought was a good omen, and we managed to fight our way on to it. In fact, I think we were the very last people in the very last carriage on the very last train out of Gloucester. I could hear the guns booming in the distance as we pulled out.' She sighed. 'There were no seats, of course.'

'There weren't any seats before the uprisings,' said Mrs Enderby tartly. 'I'm not at all sure those running the railways are in any way familiar with the concept of taking the weight off your feet during a three-hour journey.'

She drank some more wine in a belligerent manner.

'Anyway,' said Mrs Shaw, eyeing her slightly askance, 'we wedged ourselves in – there wasn't any room even to sit on the floor – and off we went.' She sighed. 'The carriage was alive with rumours. All sorts of stories were racing up and down the train, growing wilder and wilder with each retelling and frightening the already frightened even further.'

'What sort of rumours?' I asked.

‘Oh, you know the sort of thing. We were going to be stopped and searched. Anyone without the correct travel permits – that would be Mavis and me – would be dragged from the train and shot at the side of the tracks. We were almost sure that wouldn’t happen but after what we’d seen in Gloucester – well, we weren’t too sure. I did my best not to listen. And it was far too late to get off now, anyway.

‘We jolted along – stop – start – stop – start – mostly stop – for hours. It took us two hours to get to Swindon and from there we were routed to Reading. The pace picked up a little and we were beginning to think we might get through after all when, just outside Reading, we stopped again and everything went quiet. Very quiet. There was a finality to it. The engine noise died away and all the lights went out. We waited in the dark. I could hear people breathing. We had no idea what was going on. No idea whether this was a good or a bad thing. Suddenly there were dazzlingly bright lights. I could hear choppers overhead and voices shouting instructions. There was pandemonium on the train. People screaming and trying to get out. I woke Mavis ...’

‘I was just resting my eyes ...’

‘You were asleep on your feet, dear. Like a horse. People were piling out of the train and running, as they thought, for their lives. It didn’t really matter whether we wanted to get off or not – we weren’t given any choice – we were swept along with the crowd. No one was hanging around. There were always wild stories of snatch squads dragging away people who were never seen again. Or people being taken from their homes and shot out of hand in the street outside. Now I found I could remember every one of them. Anyway, Mavis fell out of the train ...’

‘I was pushed.’

‘... Mavis was pushed out of the train and I jumped down after her.’

‘You never realise railway carriages are such a long way up off the ground until you fall out of one,’ said Mrs Enderby thoughtfully. ‘I turned my ankle. And very painful it was. It still gives me trouble to this day.’ She drank more wine although whether to alleviate the memory or the pain was unclear.

‘I got her up on her feet. People were racing past us and heading off into the night. One of the helicopters was directly overhead, its beams stabbing downwards. I could hear a voice over a loudspeaker but couldn’t make out what it was saying. I just pulled Mavis’ arm over my shoulder and dragged her back down the track. Back the way we’d come. Which was good because we were out of the light, and bad because the track was on some sort of embankment and someone knocked into us in the dark and we fell down the embankment. Both of us. We rolled for what seemed like forever,

fetching up in a heap at the bottom. Mavis was hurt – I was frightened – and now we were both wet and muddy as well.’

She shook her head. I wondered if either of them had ever entertained thoughts of giving up and quietly going home, so I said, ‘It’s dark, you’re the wrong side of Reading and Mrs Enderby is hurt – what did you do next?’

I don’t know why I was surprised by their answer.

‘We stole two bicycles.’

‘You stole two bicycles? Why?’

‘Well, one wouldn’t have been much good, now would it, Max?’

‘No,’ I said contritely. ‘You’re absolutely right. Sorry.’

Mrs Enderby patted my knee. ‘That’s all right, dear.’

‘So you escaped on bicycles?’

‘Well, that was the plan, but no, not really. Mavis kept getting her coat caught in the spokes and we would have to stop to disentangle her.’

‘And what a good thing that turned out to be,’ said Mrs Enderby.

I had to ask. ‘Why was that?’

‘Patrols.’

‘Ah.’

‘We were disentangling Mavis’ coat for the umpteenth time ...’

‘The second or third time ...’

‘... When the patrol went past. We didn’t know what to do so we just froze. Mavis was caught in the spokes and I was on my knees trying to free her. There was a second when we were blinded by the searchlight, but by good luck and the grace of God, they couldn’t have been following the beam because it passed straight over us and no one noticed. We stood, stock still, hardly able to believe our luck and they carried on down the street, playing the searchlight over the buildings and down the side streets. It was raining slightly so I suspect they were just going through the motions and staying in their warm, dry vehicle with a cigarette. They turned the corner at the end of the street and we were on our own again.’

‘What did you do next?’

‘We kept calm and carried on,’ said Mrs Enderby.

‘I remember we cycled on the pavements,’ said Mrs Shaw.

I was mystified as to why this was important.

‘We were rebels without a clue, on our way to a fight we couldn’t win and facing almost certain detention if we were caught,’ declared Mrs Enderby, her voice ringing around the room. ‘History was about to be made and we were to play a part. It was our destiny.’

Mrs Mack gently moved her wine glass out of reach.

‘Pot holes,’ said Mrs Shaw succinctly. ‘The pavements weren’t brilliant but most roads looked like the surface of the moon. So we

cycled on the pavements.'

'There were people about,' said Mrs Enderby, returning from wherever she had been. 'Either lurking in doorways or besieging the hospital.'

'Yes, the old Royal Berks was doing a roaring trade, but we didn't know any of them – the lurkers, I mean – and we certainly didn't know which side they were on, and there were fires and people looting and God knows what, so we decided to avoid everyone. We didn't know what to do or where to go and then we found the Thames.'

She seemed to feel this was a matter for some congratulation.

'Had you been looking for it?' enquired Dr Bairstow, politely.

'Not specifically, no. We just turned a corner and there it was. It's awfully big, isn't it?'

'So, having found the Thames, what did you do next?'

'Well, there was a bit of a discussion ...'

'About ...?'

'Well, mostly about whether it was the Thames or not. And a little bit about Mavis' coat, but mostly about the river. I mean, I knew there were a couple of rivers in Reading but which one was which was a bit of a mystery. I myself leaned towards the Kennet and Mavis rather thought it might be the Avon.'

I was startled. 'The Avon?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Enderby unhappily. 'I really wished I'd paid more attention in Geography.'

'Wouldn't have helped,' I said, gloomily. 'I myself had to study the Amazon Basin. Manaus and rubber production.'

'Fat lot of good that would have been in the middle of Berkshire,' Mrs Shaw said scornfully, and I had to agree. My schooling was a bit of a waste of time. The only useful thing I learned was to avoid cabbage and Thomas Hardy. Oh, and not to enquire too closely into the antecedents of the Whore of Babylon unless I wanted to spend a disproportionate amount of time in detention.

Wandering once again from the narrative path, I sometimes wonder if the Education Authorities have taken leave of their collective senses. Your exam years are always on a collision course with puberty. Thoughts of sex, drugs, and rock and roll fill your world so the education people sit down and say, 'Right, we need to engage young people. How best to achieve this? I know – never mind Edward II and his red-hot poker. Never mind the Curse of Tutankhamun. Never mind the Princes in the Tower. Or the Vikings. Or Attila the Hun. They won't be interested in any of that. We'll give them the Agricultural Revolution and animal husbandry. And the Chartists. And the Spinning Jenny. And the Poor Laws. And Sunday

Schools. That should keep them happy and absorbed and lay the foundations for a lifetime's interest in History.'

I tossed off my glass of wine and explained my theory – rather brilliantly, I thought. Everyone listened politely. When I'd finished there was a pause and then Mrs Shaw said, 'Well, anyway ...' and I topped up my glass and sulked for a little while.

'Well, anyway, there was another discussion as to which way the river was flowing and whether we wanted to go up or downstream and Mavis threw her bicycle into the water.'

Dr Bairstow put down his glass. 'I hesitate to interrupt your enthralling narration again, but I find myself rather intrigued. Why?'

'To see which way it floated.'

'I am quite breathless with anticipation. What was the result of this innovative experiment?'

'It sank.'

'Unfortunate,' said Dr Bairstow and we all nodded sadly.

'I have to say I do feel badly about that,' said Mrs Shaw. 'It might have been someone's pride and joy.'

'It wasn't,' said Mrs Enderby, with some bitterness. 'It was a dark and malevolent creature of evil that kept eating my coat and it deserved its fate.'

Mrs Shaw continued. 'By this time, of course, it was getting light and we weren't sure what to do. Whether or not to keep going. We thought there might be people around either heading towards or away from the fighting, and perhaps we could somehow get our bearings, but there was no one round anywhere. It was all rather spooky, really. The dark water gurgling past and an eerie mist rising off the river. And then, as I was staring upstream, wondering what to do next, whether to find somewhere to hide or to keep going, a boat appeared through the mist and Mavis ...' She sighed. 'Mavis stuck out her thumb.'

'Really?' I said, grinning at Mrs Enderby. 'Did it stop?'

'It did. Well, it braked, or whatever it is that they do, and slowed down a bit. Not that it was exactly racing along in the first place. They don't, you know.'

I nodded, although what I know about boats could be measured on the fingers of one foot.

'It made sure to stay safely in the middle of the river, though, and I have to say I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised they didn't like the look of us. Mavis here looked as if she'd been dragged through a hedge backwards.'

Mrs Enderby bounced indignantly. 'I looked as if I'd been dragged through a hedge backwards?'

'Well, no one's blaming you, dear. We'd all had a bit of a rough

night. And you did have half a ton of plaster in your hair.'

Mrs Enderby gathered her dignity around her. 'As I have already explained – a pub fell on me.'

Mrs Shaw muttered something. I caught only the words 'usually the other way around'.

'And I had oil on my coat,' said Mrs Enderby, tragically. 'It never came out. And I couldn't afford a new one for years afterwards.' Her face changed and she smiled softly. 'I've still got it, you know.'

'So, did they let you on board the boat?' I asked.

Mrs Shaw nodded. 'Eventually, yes. And there was no "they". Just an old woman. I think if it had been a man then he might not have helped us, but it was an old woman, wrapped up in a thick man's coat and with snarly grey hair. She smoked incessantly. I've no idea where she would have got them from because cigarettes were usually used as currency. Anyway, she was one of those people who ran boats up and down the river delivering supplies wherever needed. She asked where we were going and I was too tired to lie, so I told her London. And in our own defence, I have to say you never saw two more unlikely looking rebels in your life. She stared at us for ages and then steered the boat closer and said to come aboard.

'Dawn was coming up by this time and we needed to get out of sight so I helped Mavis on board and the old woman told us to go below and make ourselves a cup of tea. It was one of those thin boats ...'

'Narrow boats, dear,' said Mrs Mack.

'... and we clambered through some sort of opening, down some steps and into a long room ...'

'Cabin,' said Mrs Enderby. 'You always get that wrong.'

'... And it was packed from floor to ceiling with explosives.'

Mrs Shaw paused to drink more wine.

I blinked. 'I should imagine that came as a bit of a shock.'

'It certainly did. Talk about from the frying pan into the fire. I clambered back out again and asked her what her cargo was. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "Textiles. From Bolivia." Well, we had nowhere else to go, so textiles it was.

'The boat was very shabby and not in good condition at all. There was a tarpaulin stretched over the roof to keep the rain out. When the light came up we could see that what little paint remained had once been dark green and red. The name had been painted over. Anyway, we were too tired to care, really. We cleared a space among the boxes, wrapped ourselves up in a couple of old blankets and got our heads down for an hour or so.'

She stopped speaking. We waited. The afternoon was wearing on. I could still hear voices outside. I had no idea what they were up to

and I really should go and investigate. It's never a good idea to leave the History Department to its own devices.

Just as I was about to drain my glass and get up to go, Mrs Shaw started up again.

'I don't know for how long we slept. I do know I was stiff and cold when I woke up. I pulled aside a tatty old red gingham curtain and peered out, really not at all sure what I would see. I knew we were still moving because I could hear the engine throbbing away and every now and then a shudder would run through the boat, there would be a moment's silence, and then it would give a gargantuan cough and start up again.' She shivered. 'I've never been on a narrow boat since.'

'What did you see? I asked, wondering whether the banks would be lined with hostile troops preparing to blow them out of the water.

'Nothing. Nothing at all. It was quite scary, actually. The whole world had gone white.'

Really? The world had gone white? I sought for a way to phrase the question. 'Do you know why?'

'Fog,' she said prosaically, and I felt rather silly. 'Thick, white fog.'

'Spooky white fog,' said Mrs Enderby. 'There was no sound or movement anywhere. It was like the end of the world. We didn't know whether it was because of the fog or ... well, whether the world had ended while we were asleep. Please don't laugh. They were strange times and you never knew what was going to happen next.'

'It was far more likely that, overnight, the government had imposed a ban on all travel,' said Mrs Shaw, briskly.

'Did you have to stop because of the fog?'

'Of course not. The old lady slowed right down. Not that we'd been going that quickly in the first place. Now, if we went any slower we'd be going backwards, but visibility was down to about six inches, so neither of us complained. We nosed our way through the fog. Mavis had the radio on, listening for any news of what was happening, but there was nothing on the radio but static. For all we knew it was all over.'

'That wasn't a good thought,' said Mrs Enderby, quietly. 'I must admit I wondered if some sort of weapon had been deployed. Chemical or gas or something. It's very hard sometimes to believe you're not the last people in the world.'

Mrs Shaw nodded.

'But, whatever had happened, we were safer on the boat than off – except when it was having one of its coughing fits, of course, so we stayed put. I was up at the front, looking out for obstacles – floating logs, other boats ...'

'Bodies ...' said Mrs Enderby.

‘... and we just kept going. I’ve no idea of our speed – inches per hour, I would think, but it didn’t matter, because we’d lost all track of time, as well. We just ... kept going. The old lady didn’t seem too bothered and even Mavis couldn’t get lost on a river.

‘Apparently we passed through Henley while I was asleep. I woke at what she said was Hambledon Lock. She got out and operated the lock while we stood ready, just in case someone tried to jump on board while we were stationary, but the lock was empty. After we passed through, we made some tea and there was some bread left although we were both much too nervous to eat. I kept thinking to myself, I’m going off to fight in a war. I’m going off to fight in a war. I’m going to die. Sometimes, when the bank was very close, I would think, I could jump. I don’t have to do this. I could jump to safety. I could just go home.

‘I don’t know whether the old lady could tell what I was thinking but after the lock she handed me the tiller – do I mean tiller? – and announced she needed to sleep for a while. Her instructions were to run parallel to the bank. Not too close. What constituted too close, she didn’t say. I was panic stricken. I said, “No, wait, I can’t. I don’t know what to do,” but she just lit another cigarette and disappeared down below. Mavis shot off to the front end to keep an eye out and tell me if we were too close or if there was anything coming, and we chugged our way onwards. I have to say it would probably have been quicker to walk ...’

‘And certainly safer,’ murmured Mrs Enderby.

‘... but it was just us, all alone in this vast, silent, empty, white world. I could barely see Mavis up at the front end. The old lady had said to wake her when we got to Marlow, although how we were supposed to know when we got to Marlow was a mystery. Some kind of signpost would have been very helpful – you know “Welcome to Marlow”, something like that, because the ship didn’t appear to have any sort of sat nav ...’

Mrs Enderby retrieved her wineglass. ‘Why would you need a sat nav? On a river, you could go only one of two ways. Three, if you count straight down to the bottom.’

‘... but it didn’t matter because the old woman emerged about four hours later, even more dishevelled than before, sniffed the air, grunted, and took the tiller off me. And very glad I was to relinquish it, too, but at least driving the boat had taken my mind off being arrested. Or shot. Or gassed. For the last ten miles or so I’d been imagining death by drowning, death by collision, death by explosion, death by hostile fish ...’

I looked at plump, cheerful Mrs Shaw, with her neatly waved grey hair and still bright-blue eyes. She was Peterson’s assistant and she

brought him biscuits with his tea and sometimes made him little cakes. Her children and grandchildren thought she was a nice little old lady with a nice little part-time job somewhere in the nice countryside. I pictured her, tense-faced, gripping the tiller, steering an unknown boat along a wide, dark river, never knowing when shots would ring out from the bank or they'd hit an unseen obstruction or even if their volatile cargo would cause the entire boat to blow up. And Mrs Enderby, still covered in oil and plaster, standing at the front like some sort of bizarre figurehead, peering into the fog and guiding them along.

'She took back the tiller and we were both stationed as lookouts,' said Mrs Shaw, recalling me to the here and now, 'because there were wrecked boats everywhere, all along both sides of the river bank. Dark shapes in the fog, leaning at strange angles or half submerged under the water. Whether they'd been deliberately scuttled by their owners we had no way of knowing. There was nothing but silence. Even the chug of the engines seemed muted. There was just the smell of diesel and the pall of blue smoke mixing with the white fog. There was no sound anywhere. We were alone in the world. The only thing moving. We nosed our way through floating wreckage, shoving it aside with long poles and calling warnings to each other in the fog. It all seemed so unreal.'

'The calm before the storm?' I suggested.

'No, not really, dear. The storm came much later.'

'The hours passed very slowly. We glided through Windsor. All the houses were boarded up. Their occupants had long since fled. And then, just as I was wondering how long we'd been travelling and how much longer we had to go, there was a shout in the fog. From behind us. I was convinced we'd been discovered.'

'I nearly fell into the river with fright,' said Mrs Enderby, 'but it turned out to be another boat like ours. Driven by an old man and a young boy. They fell in behind us and when I looked back I caught glimpses of more boats in the fog. Not all of them as big as ours. Some were quite tiny. We were a convoy.'

I couldn't help asking. 'Were they all carrying textiles, too?'

She grinned.

'We chugged past the silent bulk of Windsor Castle. It had been seized very early on and occupied. I couldn't help wondering what horrors were going on behind those walls at that very moment.'

'There was thick woodland on either side of us and the trees ran right down to the river, so we pulled out into the middle for safety. We were very slow and very silent now. No one spoke at all.'

'After Windsor, the fog closed in again. But now the fog was good. Fog swallowed the sight and sound of us. All I could hear was the

wash slapping against the side of the bank.

‘And then, at Hampton Court – we were stopped. Suddenly and without any warning, a big, dark River Police boat loomed out of the fog and shouted at us. We hadn’t heard or seen them until they were right on top of us and it was too late to do anything. I remember thinking – this is it. They’ve got us now.’

‘My heart was in my mouth,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘The cabin was jam-packed with ... textiles ... they couldn’t miss them. I wondered if the old lady was on some kind of suicide mission. That her job was to blow herself and the River Police out of the water so the others could get through. I was in two minds whether to jump. Except my coat was heavy and would probably drown me and, covered in oil or not, I certainly wasn’t going to leave it behind, so I watched two of them board us and waited for the worst to happen.’

‘I don’t know why,’ said Mrs Shaw, ‘but I was convinced they were looking for us. Mavis and me, I mean. That somehow, they knew we’d been at Gloucester and that they wanted to interrogate us.’ She shook her head. ‘I wasn’t very brave.’

No one said a word.

‘Anyway, they jumped aboard. They were armed, but their guns were slung over their shoulders. I suppose they were being covered by their colleagues on the boat.’

‘The old lady had sent us downstairs,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘When being searched by hostile forces it always pays to look busy, as I’m sure you know, Max, so Elizabeth was making tea and I’d spread my coat over some of the boxes and was trying to scrub the oil off.’

‘I heard them talking to the old lady. She sat calmly at the tiller with the ever-present cigarette smoke curling around her head. I saw her reach inside her coat and pull out her papers. She was obviously known to them because he gave them only a very cursory inspection. The other one stuck her head into the cabin.’

‘I said, “Tea?” and even with just that one word, my voice was jumping about all over the place. The police officer said she’d love one but no thanks and where were we from and Mavis said Welwyn Garden City and she sighed and said no, where had we sailed from and I said Reading and she asked what was happening there and Mavis said she’d heard they’d stopped a train from Gloucester there but whether that was true or not she couldn’t say and the police officer said what was she doing in Reading and Mavis said falling off her bloody bike mostly and look at the oil on this coat and she’d never get it out and the officer said to try WD40 and Mavis said thanks very much she would and I said was she sure she didn’t want some tea and she said no thanks and just as I was beginning to think we’d got away with it she asked what were we carrying. Well, we

both knew better than to turn and stare at the boxes and Mavis said she thought it was textiles and there was a funny pause and then the officer said textiles eh, how many boxes, and Mavis shrugged and said twenty or thirty she thought but she hadn't seen the manifest and the officer said well everything seemed to be in order here take care ladies and disappeared back up the stairs and I realised I hadn't drawn a breath for the last five minutes.'

'They didn't search you?' I asked, amazed.

'No, they didn't. Apparently, the magic word "textiles" opens all doors. We knew better than to stop what we were doing, so Mavis carried on dabbing at her coat and I finished making the tea and when I took a mug up to the old lady, they were leaving.'

'Just like that?'

She shrugged. 'They had a couple of boxes of "textiles" under their arms. Not everyone in uniform fought for the government.'

'You were lucky.'

'Yes, we were. We were lucky all the way through. Not everyone was, though.'

'So how long were you on this boat?'

'I honestly have no idea. When we talked about it afterwards, Mavis said she thought it was at least two days, possibly three. I thought it was more, but we never knew exactly.'

'It was over a week,' said Dr Bairstow, gently.

'Was it really?' she said. 'I've tried to work it out on my fingers often enough and I still can't get it right. I do know that, at some point, she suddenly pulled over and said this was as far as she could take us. When I looked back, all the other boats had moored up and were unloading as fast as they could go.'

'Why?'

'Well, they wouldn't want to hang about, would they? Not with all those "textiles" around the place.'

'No, I mean why there? Where were you?'

She shrugged. 'I've no idea. Even without the fog I had no idea where we were but, obviously, this was some sort of pick-up point because, as well as a ton of crates and bundles, a whole load of stretchers lay on the bank with ten or twelve heavily-bandaged people sitting or lying on them. Presumably, this was the return cargo.'

'Our space was urgently required,' said Mrs Enderby. 'We couldn't complain. She'd brought us all that way.'

'She did offer us a choice though – north or south bank,' said Mrs Shaw.

'I don't know why you chose the south bank,' said Mrs Enderby.

'I think I'd heard the government held the north bank. Not that it

made any difference. Whichever side we chose we hadn't a clue what to do next or where to go,' said Mrs Shaw. 'We'd never actually planned on getting this far.'

'I honestly thought we'd have been stopped or turned back or shot long before this,' said Mrs Enderby, 'but we weren't. We didn't know it at the time, but we would end up at the heart of things. Alongside the rebels at Battersea Power Station.'

'Anyway,' said Mrs Shaw, 'the old woman pushed off and the boat disappeared back into the fog. I don't know where she was going. I don't even know if she went up or down river. And all the other boats had disappeared as well. A moment later there was just us, an empty bank, and the dark river at our feet.'

'It's a funny thing,' said Mrs Enderby, but only a hundred yards or so from the river bank, the fog completely disappeared and we stepped out into clear, cold sunshine.'

'River fog,' said Dr Bairstow, gravely. 'A not uncommon phenomenon. May I enquire as to your next move?'

'Well, we found a road,' said Mrs Shaw, 'but thumbing failed, thanks to some of us not looking quite as dainty as we should, so we set off to see what we could find. We had absolutely no idea where we were and no idea as to what to do next. We didn't know whether we were walking towards or away from London and we were engaged in quite a vigorous discussion when we saw the cottage.'

'What cottage?'

'No idea. It was simply a little house, half hidden in trees, set back from the road and, as far as we could see, completely deserted. There were no signs of life. The curtains were drawn. No smoke from the chimneys. Nothing.'

'What time was it?'

'Well, we weren't sure of that either, but the shadows were long, so we thought either early morning or late evening. We hammered on the doors – front and back – and there was no reply, which was a little daunting.'

'But on the other hand, no one shot us,' said Mrs Enderby, cheerfully.

'So ... what did you do?'

'We stole the motorbike.'

I sat up. My already sky-high respect for these ladies rocketed into the stratosphere. 'What motorbike?'

'The one we found when we nipped round the back for a comfort break.'

I sighed, historian training coming to the fore. 'Didn't you go before you got off the boat?'

'Oh, yes.' They beamed at me and I decided not to pursue the

matter any further.

‘You can both ride a motorbike?’

There was a short silence and then Mrs Shaw said, ‘As it turned out – no.’

‘What do you mean – as it turned out?’

‘Well, both of us assumed the other could – and we were quite wrong.’

‘You said you wanted to sit at the front,’ said Mrs Enderby, indignantly. ‘I thought you knew what you were doing.’

‘I wanted to be at the front because I was the one who knew the way. I assumed you would advise me on the more technical bits. You know, shout instructions over my shoulder.’ She turned back to me. ‘And, indeed, there was a lot of shouting over my shoulder, but none of it was particularly helpful. Our first mistake, of course, was to set off across country because we thought it would be easier and quicker than the road. You know, roadblocks, personnel checks ... that sort of thing.’

‘Roads tend to be there for a reason,’ said Mrs Mack, leaning forward to top up everyone’s glasses. ‘Usually, to facilitate safe and rapid progress to one’s destination.’

‘Well, we weren’t all lucky enough to be chauffeur driven to the next military engagement,’ said Mrs Enderby, snippily.

‘Indeed,’ said Mrs Shaw, the two of them now temporarily united against those who had been privileged enough to enjoy the comparative comfort of a military Land Rover.

‘I was strafed, you know,’ said Mrs Mack indignantly.

‘We were chased by a herd of heifers,’ countered Mrs Enderby.

‘There were roadblocks to dodge.’

‘We got stuck in a hedge.’

‘I was constantly having to detour around places that weren’t safe.’

‘Trust me, they were even less safe after Elizabeth had driven straight through them without stopping. That poor cat ...’

‘I had to steal more petrol.’

‘We ran out of petrol completely.’

‘I got lost.’

‘We got our front wheel caught in a ploughed furrow and couldn’t get out. If we hadn’t actually hit that gate we would probably have ended up in Arbroath.’

‘I got a puncture.’

‘We fell off. Twice.’

Both sides subsided, exhausted. I didn’t dare look at Dr Bairstow.

‘Fortunately,’ said Mrs Shaw, ‘it turned out that we didn’t have far to go.’

‘Where were you going?’ I asked.

There was a pause. ‘Well, we weren’t sure, actually. We thought we’d just ... see what happened.’

‘And what did happen?’

‘We ran out of petrol. Probably the best thing that could have happened.’

That was my opinion, too, but I knew better than to express it.

‘So how far did you get?’

‘On the motorbike?’

‘Yes.’

‘Altogether?’

‘Yes.’

‘From start to finish?’

‘Yes.’

‘About a mile and a half.’

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Yes. It was a short journey but quite eventful. And that was why the bike had been left behind, of course – there wasn’t enough petrol in it to go anywhere.’

‘Please reassure me you did not throw this conveyance into the river as well,’ said Dr Bairstow.

‘We’d lost the river by now,’ said Mrs Shaw gloomily, ‘so we had to head back into the fog again.’

‘Where were you?’

‘We honestly had no idea. We couldn’t even agree on the length of time we’d been on the boat. We had no idea of the speed at which we’d been travelling and any recognisable landmarks had been lost in the fog.’

‘But surely you must have been nearly there,’ I said.

‘Well, our problem was that we didn’t know where “nearly there” was. And it was only now that we were so close to London that we realised we didn’t know where we were going or what we would do when we got there. So we just put our heads down and kept walking. For what seemed like a very, very long time.’

‘So how did you know when you’d arrived at your destination?’

‘When a man appeared out of the fog, stuck a rifle in our faces and demanded to know who we were.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Enderby. ‘And we didn’t so much “arrive at our destination” as suddenly find we couldn’t go any further. Not without being shot, anyway.’

‘What did you do?’

‘We didn’t know what to do because we didn’t know who we were talking to. Yes, he was wearing some kind of scruffy uniform, but no one looked very smart those days and he could have been anyone. Army. Rebel. Police. Freelance looter. There were people around us.

A lot of people by the sound of things, but they were just shapes in the fog so there was no clue there. I could smell something cooking which reminded me how hungry I was.

‘Anyway, we were passed from one group to another, not having a clue what was going on. We found out later we’d stumbled into an enormous refugee camp that went on for miles and culminated at the edges of Battersea Park. They wanted to know who we were and where we were going and we didn’t have a clue what to say, so, in the end, we told the truth. We said we were a couple of civilians from Gloucester who had been sent to report on the situation there.’

‘I think we hoped we’d be escorted to some kind of building which would be clearly marked Rebel HQ or Government Forces HQ or whatever and we could tailor our report accordingly,’ said Mrs Shaw. ‘I was rehearsing various versions of our story in my head when our latest escort shouted something, someone stepped out of all the murk, and it was Theresa, looking very military and purposeful. Well, I recognised her from Gloucester, of course, but all I could do was stare at her, too startled to speak. She looked us up and down and did an excellent job of hiding her delight at our arrival.’ She turned to Mrs Mack. ‘A little unkind, dear.’

‘Two girls, dirty, exhausted, with no weapons, no combat experience, no supplies, bringing more than seven-day-old news from Gloucester. And another two mouths to feed. Of course I was delighted to see you.’

It was probably time to intervene. ‘So how did you manage to get yourselves to the old Chelsea Bridge?’

‘Well, actually ...’ said Mrs Enderby, and stopped. They both looked embarrassed.

I prompted. ‘Yes?’

‘Well ... we were already there. We’d seen this Chinese Pagoda thing on the way and assumed we were in Kew Gardens and, after they’d questioned us and we’d questioned them, it turned out we weren’t – in Kew Gardens, I mean. We were in Battersea Park. Right next door to Chelsea Bridge. Barricade Bridge as it now is.’

‘Isn’t that where you wanted to be?’

Mrs Enderby stirred uneasily. ‘I don’t think we’d envisaged being quite so ... central, dear. I think we thought they’d put us behind a barricade on a street corner somewhere unimportant and we’d have to ... you know ... defend it. Somehow.’

‘Instead of which,’ continued Mrs Shaw, ‘we were right in the middle of ... well, everything. The old power station was just down the road – or possibly up the road. Every time I looked the river seemed to be flowing in a different direction ...’

‘Tidal, Elizabeth. We did explain it to you.’

‘Anyway, they’d made the power station their HQ and all sorts of important people were there and Theresa’s job was to hold the bridge.’

‘Against?’

‘Against the government forces on the north bank. We couldn’t have been in a more ...’ she paused, seeking the correct word.

‘I think “strategic” might be the word you’re looking for,’ said Mrs Mack, mildly.

‘Dangerous. Yes, that was the word. Dangerous. Or “strategic” as Theresa likes to refer to it. Yes, we couldn’t have been in a more strategic position if we’d planned everything down to the last detail.’

I thought of them being the very last people on the very last train out of Gloucester. And of their lucky escape at Reading. And the old boat that happened to be passing with its cargo of Bolivian textiles. And the all-concealing fog. And of them being passed from person to person before turning up, against all the odds, at the place where they could do the most good. I said nothing.

‘Anyway, they gave us some bread and a blanket between us and we found a place to sleep for a few hours until they woke us up. Someone wanted to talk to us, apparently.’

‘We shambled up on to the bridge. They were building the barricades – big things, much more substantial than our efforts at Gloucester – together with gun shelters along the middle. They asked us again about Gloucester and what had happened at Reading. We didn’t say anything about the old woman. I think they assumed we’d just followed the river and, really, that was true. They were interested to hear we’d fought at Gloucester and before we could say anything they handed us a gun each and told us we were to stay on the bridge. I started to say we hadn’t done very much fighting, but no one was listening and I thought ...’

‘Mistakenly ...’

‘...that we’d be better off on the bridge than in the park.’

‘I don’t know why you thought that, Elizabeth.’

‘On reflection, dear, neither do I.’

Mrs Enderby continued. ‘Well, it was getting dark. Either more buildings were burning or the flames were more visible at night because a large part of the city seemed to be on fire. We could hear helicopters criss-crossing overhead. I knew they were expecting tanks to turn up at any moment and a constant stream of people were bringing furniture, dragging up old vehicles, chains, fallen trees, anything they could lay their hands on, really, strengthening the already huge barricades that everyone knew probably wouldn’t hold them back for more than a few minutes.’

She sipped her wine. ‘We knew every bridge was similarly blocked,

but the troops would get here sooner or later – sooner, probably, given the proximity of the rebel-held power station – and then it would be our turn.

‘No one slept that night. A curfew had been imposed weeks before, but in the distance, we could hear sounds of explosions and the occasional rattle of gunfire, drawing closer all the time. We huddled under our blanket, guns at our sides, although what we thought we were going to do with them ...

‘The next day dawned very cold and frosty. The day before St George’s Day. Any trace of the fog had disappeared. It was bright and chilly. The wind was ruffling the surface of the river. There was no breakfast.

‘Shortly after dawn a loudspeaker van pulled up on the north bank and boomed commands for everyone to dismantle the barricades and disperse. We were either to go home or to report to the nearest police station. Someone made a rude noise but no one laughed. They hung around for a while and then disappeared, but someone must have had a broadcasting unit somewhere, because at noon on the dot, someone very slowly and very solemnly read the Riot Act over the radio. I watched the faces of everyone around me because now we knew things were getting really serious. A few people did want to leave and they were allowed to go. They closed the barricades behind them and now, of course, we couldn’t get out even if we wanted to.’

‘Did you want to?’ I asked.

Mrs Enderby smiled. ‘Truth be told, yes. If someone had stood in front of me and said, “You’re too young to be here. Off you go while you still can,” I think I would have. Fortunately, no one did.’

Mrs Shaw nodded agreement. ‘We took up our positions. I was on the north end of the bridge, Mavis on the south. Although they’d given us guns, we were both in the second rank. Loaders. And then it really started. That was when we realised we were completely out of our depth.’

‘They were working their way up the river, taking control of the bridges as they went. Tower Bridge had been deliberately disabled. Westminster was firmly under government control. Lambeth surrendered quite early on. Then they started on Vauxhall Bridge. I couldn’t see anything from where I was stationed, but I could hear the explosions and the gunfire and the shouting. I could feel the impacts. I could smell the smoke. And all the time we crouched behind our shelters, knowing that we would be next. I asked why they didn’t just bomb the bridges because it would be so much easier and quicker, but the woman next to me said they wouldn’t do that except as a last resort, because they’d want to keep them intact. Bridges are important. It was the people on them who were

expendable.’

‘Well, that might have been their plan,’ said Mrs Shaw, ‘but they didn’t have much choice at Vauxhall. The fighting was really fierce there and, in the end, the rebels blew the bridge themselves. And then, of course, it was our turn.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Mack, quietly. ‘That was when the tanks appeared.’

She stopped and fumbled for her glass.

‘Interesting origin of the word “tanks”,’ said Dr Bairstow conversationally, apparently not noticing. ‘During the First World War they were labelled as “water tanks” on cargo manifests, to trick the Germans into thinking they were for carrying water. They’ve been known as tanks ever since. First used at Flers-Courcelette during the Battle of the Somme.’

And with those words I was back in the mud, running for my life as a burning hospital collapsed around me, pushing men to safety, screaming at them to get out ... I shook myself, glad I was sitting in a corner and no one was paying me any attention.

Mrs Shaw continued. ‘They didn’t deploy them immediately. Their troops used them as cover while they shot at us. We fired back. The noise was tremendous. My ears were hurting. People passed me their weapons and I just kept my head down and concentrated on my job. My palms were sweaty and covered in gun oil. And then the man in front of me fell and no one stepped up to take his place, so I rolled him to one side – he was quite dead – and I found a chink in the barricade and started firing.’

She stopped to drink some wine.

‘I gave my gun away,’ said Mrs Enderby, quietly. ‘I hadn’t a clue what to do with it, so I helped with the casualties instead. I had no idea what I was doing. I had no medical experience. No medical equipment. I just tore up whatever I could find and bandaged as best I could. I helped carry people away to relative safety away from the barricades and then went back for the next lot, ducking and dodging bullets all the way. The day wore on. Either the smoke was thick or, more likely, I’d lost all sense of time because I slowly became aware I couldn’t see what I was doing. We had no torches or lanterns because that would have been silly. I could only see by the flashes of gunfire. I remember working on one woman. She was alive. Next flash – she was dead. Only a few seconds later. She’d slipped away in the dark.’

‘I really don’t know how I kept going. I was tired, terrified and desperate for a drink. I think it was anger that kept me on my feet. They were shooting at us. We were shooting at them. People were dying everywhere. And this wasn’t a foreign invasion – this was us – fighting and killing each other. I remember thinking – this is so stupid. How did it come to this? Why didn’t we all sit down with a

cup of tea – years ago, when things first started to go wrong – and just sort it all out then? It was all so ... stupid.'

She subsided and Mrs Shaw leaned across to pat her hand and top up her wine.

'The night wore on,' said Mrs Mack. 'Things quietened down as the sun came up and then, just as we were congratulating ourselves on having got through the night, the helicopter gunships turned up.'

I nodded. I knew this part.

Mrs Mack continued. 'Battersea Power Station was burning, Vauxhall Bridge was gone, and we were obviously next on their list of things to destroy that day.'

Mrs Enderby shivered. 'They were Leviathans. Three of them. Remember?'

Mrs Mack nodded. 'Massive pieces of kit. Double-rotored and low slung with missiles. Talk about overkill. Each one had enough firepower to take out a city, never mind one bridge, and a rotary canon at the front, in case we'd missed the half-dozen missiles hanging beneath them. You don't see them these days – Leviathans, I mean. They're all gone now, but they were designed to shock and awe, and shock and awe was what they got. Especially from me. Trust me, you really don't want to see one of those coming at you out of the rising sun.'

'And there were three of them,' said Mrs Shaw. 'I don't know why. One would have been more than enough.'

'One to do the damage,' said Mrs Mack, 'and the other two to make the point.'

'Two of them stayed some way back, although I don't know why,' said Mrs Mack. 'Other than call them rude names, there really wasn't anything we could do to them. The middle one dropped down until it was low and level with the bridge. And then it just hung in the air and looked at us.'

'I remember the pilot was female,' said Mrs Enderby. 'Or rather, the voice over the amplifier was female, so I assumed the pilot was as well. Anyway, this was our final warning. Vauxhall Bridge had been completely destroyed. Battersea Power Station was under attack and was about to be overrun. We were to surrender immediately or they would open fire. No further warning would be given. She repeated her message three times and then they waited. I think the idea was to give us time to realise there was no hope and quietly give in. I don't think any thought of resistance even entered their heads, and why would it? All they had to do was strafe the bridge, lob a couple of RPGs at the barricades, arrest any survivors, and their way would be open. They would approach the power station from two sides and then it really would all be over.'

‘I looked around the bridge,’ said Mrs Mack. ‘There were wounded people everywhere, sitting, lying, dying. Our barricades were on fire. We were almost out of ammunition. There had never been much hope and now there was none at all. There was nothing we could do against such firepower. If they wanted to they could take out the bridge and everything around it – Chelsea Hospital, the old water tower, all the helpless people who were still in Battersea Park because they didn’t have anywhere else to go, the old Flying Duck pub, the power station. Everything ... not just buildings and territory ... everything we were fighting for would be blown apart and gone forever.’

She drained her glass and set it down with immense precision, concentrating on lining it up next to the bottle.

‘Like Mavis, I was angry. We were killing each other and destroying everything around us. It was as Princess Mary had said. “Enough is Enough.” I looked around at the insanity. It had to stop. Somewhere, a voice was telling me it wasn’t too late to take a chance. A line had to be drawn somewhere and why not here? Why not now? And somebody had to do it.’

She sighed. ‘I looked down. There was a Union Jack lying at my feet. I had no idea where it could have come from. It had been trampled and it was wet and muddy and there was blood on it, but it was recognisable. I bent down and picked it up. The gunships were still there. I looked at the pilot looking at me, and then I looked at the other two above and behind it. The air was filled with the deafening clatter of their rotors.’

She stopped.

‘Go on,’ said Mrs Enderby.

‘I don’t know what made me do it. I climbed up onto the roof of a burned-out car, spread out the flag and held it above my head. I could feel it flapping in the wind from the rotors. I stood there for what seemed like years, waiting for something to happen. I don’t know what. I stood on the roof of that car, holding an old flag and staring down a Leviathan gunship. I was convinced my last moments had come. I waited for the shots to ring out. I had no idea what was happening behind me and the rotors were making too much noise for me to hear.

‘And then, someone climbed up beside me. For one moment, I thought they were going to drag me down and force a surrender. I thought we’d given in. That this was the end. But it wasn’t.’

There was silence in the room. Someone had to ask and it was me. ‘Who was it?’

There was another long silence and then Mrs Enderby said, ‘Elizabeth. And then me.’

Mrs Mack smiled. 'I was vaguely aware that somewhere along the way we'd picked up a couple of idiots too daft to keep themselves safe. I'd taken them in because they'd had nowhere else to go, but they'd made themselves useful. I'd seen them fetching and carrying, making tea, doing what they could, both of them filthy dirty and one of them, for some reason, covered in oil.'

'Well,' said Mrs Shaw, visibly embarrassed. 'You were a bit exposed, dear. Somehow it didn't seem right to leave you up there on your own.'

'We thought you might want some tea,' said Mrs Enderby, quickly.

'I couldn't quite believe it,' said Mrs Mack, 'but before I knew what was happening, hundreds of people were doing the same, holding up makeshift Union Jacks. I don't know where they found them from. From the tattered remains of their uniforms perhaps. Or they scribbled them on old bits of paper. They drew them in blood, or dirt and some of them weren't very accurate but that wasn't the point. Every single one was a Union Jack and suddenly they were everywhere. Everywhere. Anyone who could stand was on their feet and holding one above their head.'

'They collected some of them afterwards and made a display in St Paul's,' said Mrs Enderby.

'I've still got mine,' said Mrs Shaw.

'So have I.'

Mrs Mack was talking to herself now. 'I turned back to the gunship, which obviously hadn't moved and shrieked as loudly as I could, "Enough is enough. Stand down." I don't know why I did that. They couldn't possibly have heard me.'

'But others did,' said Mrs Enderby. 'I heard you. I shouted, "Enough is enough," as well, and then someone else did as well and the cry was taken up all along bridge. There were hundreds of us, all at once, all together, holding up our little flags, and all of us shouting, "Enough is enough," and "Stand down."'

'And not just on the bridge,' said Mrs Shaw. 'You could hear it all along the river bank. People's voices, all shouting "Enough is enough!" together.' Her eyes were far away. 'It was as if every individual voice merged into one giant shout. The Voice of the People, they called it afterwards. All of them shouting – no, demanding – "Stand down!" It wasn't a surrender. It was a command.'

'And then the people themselves started to appear. Emerging from whatever shelter they'd managed to construct. Stumbling from bombed-out buildings, from behind broken vehicles, from out of holes in the ground, coughing their way through the smoke. I never realised, but hundreds of people had been sheltering under the bridge and along the embankment all this time. People were climbing out

from under the wreckage that had been Battersea Park, and all of them were confronting the military, waving tiny, homemade flags and shouting, "Enough is enough. Stand down."

"The lead gunship was so close I could see the pilot quite clearly. Her helmet and goggles made her quite impersonal. She was just a cog in the military machine. We looked at each other. Any minute now she would rake the bridge with gunfire and we would die. We would all die. I never knew who she was but, for a moment, that young pilot held the fate of us all in her hands. I wanted to look for Trevor but I didn't dare to look away. I didn't dare take my eyes off her. My only thought was that we – Trevor and I – had been together through all this, almost from the beginning, and I wanted to be with him at what I was convinced was the end.'

She stopped talking to sip her wine. I looked down into my glass. I could see it all. Thick, oily smoke blowing across the river. Exhausted, dirty and defiant people waving their own hastily made-up flags against a backdrop of burning buildings. The river full of rubbish from broken boats. The deafening clatter of three huge helicopter gunships filling the sky. Three women standing under a wildly flapping Union Jack shouting 'Enough is enough' to a pilot who couldn't possibly hear them. That long, long, moment when everything hung in the balance and things could go either way. And the continuous and never-ending demand. 'Stand down.'

'And they did,' said Mrs Mack.

'You sound surprised,' said Dr Bairstow.

'I am. Even after all this time I'm still astounded at what happened.'

'What did happen?' I asked, although I knew.

'Well, after what seemed like an endless wait – and, believe me, when you're standing on a wrecked vehicle looking a helicopter gunship in the eye the words "endless wait" can take on a whole new meaning – the other two gunships backed off a little way. I'm almost certain they'd received orders to move on to Albert Bridge and to leave the other one to mop things up here. Everything was ... waiting. I'm not sure for what. For me, there was a feeling that everything hung in the balance and one wrong move ...'

Mrs Enderby stirred. 'I sometimes wonder what the pilot was thinking. How much stomach he or she had for firing on their own people. I know there was wind and noise but I only remember stillness and silence.'

Mrs Mack nodded. 'That's right. I'm sure most of us were waiting for her to open fire. But she didn't. She lifted her hand, whether in acknowledgment or farewell, I never knew. The gunship dipped its nose, just once, almost like a bow, and then, with a thunderous

clatter, they all pulled up and away. I had to close my eyes because the backwash of hot exhaust fumes nearly blew me off the car. When I was able to open them again, they were clattering back down the river. Back the way they'd come.

'I stood stunned. I couldn't take it in. I didn't dare take my eyes off them in case it was all a trick and they turned back and attacked, but they didn't. They got smaller and smaller until they were just three tiny black dots lost in the smoke drifting across the rising sun.'

'People were shouting, "Stand down."' said Mrs Shaw. She turned to Mrs Enderby. 'They were everywhere, weren't they, dear?'

'I wouldn't know,' said Mrs Enderby. 'I had my eyes shut the whole time.'

Mrs Mack smiled. 'They said afterwards they could hear the cheering in France, but I don't know about that. All I do know is that that was the moment, thank God, when we all stepped back and everyone took a breath. I looked for Trevor. I knew he would be somewhere close by. And he was. About ten feet away, grinning up at me, clutching his own grubby flag. His face was dirty and streaked with blood and I don't know what he had in his hair, but he was smiling at me. I jumped down from the car – my legs were trembling so much they would hardly hold me up – and I ran towards him. He started to say something and then ... then there was one last chatter of machine guns. The final shots fired in anger. They said afterwards they'd been aimed at me, but we'll never know now, and Trevor fell. I found I was still clutching the flag and I used it to try to staunch the bleeding but it was too late. He was the very last person to die in the conflict. We could hear the call to stand down spreading like a forest fire, but it was too late for Trevor. The government withdrew its forces and two days later they resigned and it was all over.'

The silence went on and on.

I said through stiff lips, 'Then what did you do?'

'I buried my husband.'

I knew the rest of course. Unbelievably, even after everything that had happened, all sides failed to reach an agreement. Power-sharing seemed the best way to go, but who would share what power and with whom was the subject of endless pointless arguments. They couldn't even agree a provisional leader.

When Princess Mary reluctantly took over as head of the interim government, she told them that they wouldn't agree to, or even like, some of the measures she intended to implement, and they still said OK. She said Are you sure? They said yes, she said so be it, and then she really got stuck in. All sorts of power-limiting legislation was rammed through. Civil liberties and Habeas corpus were restored.

She was right, some politicians didn't like it and, even then, there were attempts to block the legislation. There's a story that she stormed into one meeting and threatened to shoot them all if they couldn't come to a consensus. She pointed out that one government had already been overthrown, adding, significantly, that these things are always easier the second time around.

At the end of the first year, however, they hadn't done too bad a job and it was agreed they'd serve for another two years after which elections would be held. Slowly, and not without a great deal of mutual suspicion, things began to return to normal. There was a record turn-out for the elections. Suddenly everyone wanted their voice to be heard. Memories of the consequences of electoral apathy were too recent.

People picked up their lives. Mrs Mack would face a bleak widowhood until Dr Bairstow knocked on her door. Mrs Enderby would return to Welwyn Garden City just in time to meet and marry Mr Enderby, and Mrs Shaw would re-join her husband and go on to lead a normal life. Until she met St Mary's, that is. And here they were today, sitting in a slowly darkening room, silently remembering times past.

I should leave. I should leave them to their memories. But just as I was about to get up and go, someone tapped at the door. I seized on the excuse.

'I'll see who it is.'

It was Markham

'Do you want me?' I enquired, hoping he did.

'Not really,' he said, peering around me. 'I'm looking for Dr Bairstow.'

I blinked. It was usually the other way around. 'Mr Markham for you, sir.'

'Ah, yes. Good evening, Mr Markham. Is there any word?'

'There is, sir, and the word is "go".'

'How long?'

'Just under fifteen minutes, sir.'

'Then we had better make a move. Ladies, I wonder if you would allow me the honour of escorting you.'

'Why?' said Mrs Mack. 'Where are we going?'

'This way, if you please.'

He rose to his feet, settled his stick and offered his arm to Mrs Mack.

Mystified – it doesn't take much – I stared at Markham, who simply grinned. It pisses me off no end when he knows something I don't. It's just not in the natural order of things.

'Ladies, if you would be so good.'

They filed out. Mrs Mack and Dr Bairstow going ahead, with Markham following on behind, Mrs Enderby on one arm and Mrs Shaw on the other. I assumed they were making sure he didn't get lost. I trailed along behind and I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one who didn't know what was going on.

All the lights were on in the Great Hall. I was a little horrified to find so much of the afternoon had flown by while I'd been swilling wine and listening to stories of days gone by. On the other hand, isn't that the official definition of an historian?

Mr Strong was lurking near the front doors. On purpose, I suspected. The rest of the building seemed suspiciously deserted and once again I was conscious of a nagging feeling that I'd missed something. Trust me, a silent History Department is considerably more unnerving than a History Department in full cry.

Mr Strong threw open the front doors. It wasn't yet dark but the light was beginning to go. The setting sun was streaking the sky with orange and red. Ahead of us, the South Lawn was just a long dark patch of grass.

It looked as if they'd laid out some sort of firework display, culminating about a hundred feet from St Mary's.

Panicking, I found Peterson. 'Oh my God, Tim. Not the professor's homemade fireworks? Not after the last time.'

'No, no, no. Stop panicking. They're just flares. Although we've done them in pretty colours to keep the Security Section happy.'

'Are we having some sort of display? What's going on? Why don't I know about this?'

'Dr Bairstow's instructions. Need to know, Max.'

'It's my department,' I said, more than a little peeved. 'I need to know.'

'It's a surprise.'

'What is?'

'All this. It's to mark today's anniversary.' He looked at his watch, caught Markham's eye and nodded.

Markham beckoned to Lingoss. Today's hair was white and red. In honour of St George, presumably.

'Ready when you are, Miss Lingoss.'

'Please try not to set fire to the buildings,' said Peterson.

Markham ignited his portfire and waved it in a menacing manner. 'I'd move if I were you, Dr Peterson, in case we mistake you for a flare. You know what happened last time.'

I turned to Peterson. 'Please tell me they're proper flares and not something the professor knocked up just this afternoon.'

'They're proper flares,' he said soothingly.

'But why do we need them? What are they for? What's happening?'

‘Hush,’ he said. ‘It’s starting.’

I thought, given the date, that we were in for some sort of patriotic pyrotechnic display, but I was completely wrong.

Dr Bairstow stood at the top of the steps, Mrs Mack at his side. Mr Strong bustled forwards, ushering Mrs Shaw to one side and Mrs Enderby to the other. Satisfied he had them all standing in the right place, he and Dr Bairstow both stepped back into the growing shadows, leaving the three of them together on the steps. I heard Mrs Mack ask again what was happening and then, suddenly, the flares blazed into life, burning brilliant red, white and blue in the half-light of evening.

St Mary’s stood in a silent cluster at the foot of the steps. I saw Major Guthrie, with Leon standing beside him. Mr Strong was wearing his medals. Even Mrs Midgley and the housekeeping team had emerged from the depths of St Mary’s to join in whatever was about to happen here. I slipped away to stand with the rest of the History Department. No one spoke and yet there was a feeling that something important was about to happen. We waited in unaccustomed silence, watching the flares blaze, red, white, and blue.

Dr Bairstow smiled at Mrs Mack. ‘We thought that, on this important day, you might like to renew an old acquaintance.’

I saw Markham consult his watch. ‘Any minute now, sir.’

I heard it before I saw it – the familiar chopping sound of helicopter rotors. Loud and powerful. And here it came. Big, black and threatening. Coming low and fast out of the setting sun. Exactly as another one had done all those years ago. It was really moving, too, and getting larger by the second.

The last Leviathan. I’d seen pictures of them, but I’d never seen one in real life. And certainly not this close. Even from this distance the disturbance from the rotors was tugging at my hair. It was huge and as I looked, it dropped even lower, skimming the trees and heading straight for us.

I looked back at Mrs Mack, standing together with Mrs Enderby and Mrs Shaw, much as they must have done once before. They were holding hands. I looked away.

The Leviathan dropped out of sight for a moment. I just had time to wonder where it had gone when, with a deafening roar, it reared up over the top of the horse chestnuts, homed in on the red, white, and blue flares, and hung directly in front of us, huge and menacing.

I was conscious of the whump, whump, whump of the double rotors as it held its position. I could see every massive detail. The red and green navigation lights. I could even make out the shape of the pilot, helmeted and impassive, just as Mrs Mack had described. I could see the blur of the blades. The colossal canon slung on the

front. The missile holders were empty – thank God – but as Mrs Mack had said, this was a machine designed to shock and awe and even without them it was doing a bloody good job. I was shocked and awed all over the place. What must it have been like for the three of them, facing this military machine – alone and desperate, with no hope of survival, let alone victory?

The moment stretched on and on. Much as it had for Mrs Mack, Mrs Enderby, and Mrs Shaw and for everyone at the Battersea Barricades that day, whichever side they happened to be fighting on. I can't say nothing moved, because my hair was streaming behind me and dust and leaves were being whipped up around us in small whirlwinds.

For a seemingly endless time, it held its position. Waiting. But waiting for what?

And then Mrs Mack took half a step forward. For a moment, History repeated itself as she and the pilot stared at each other, and then she raised her hand. An acknowledgement? A greeting?

The mighty machine dipped its nose, just once, almost like a bow, paused, and then, with a sudden roar of power, it pulled up and away and went clattering off into the gathering night.

THE END

I always meant to write this story and kept putting it off because I wasn't sure of either the cause or the history of the Civil Uprisings that culminated in the Battersea Barricades. Then, during last year's June heatwave, I was struggling into a sweater – long story – and one of the arms was inside out and I lost my way. I was flailing around like a maniac and, somehow, I managed to hit myself over the head and it really hurt. I had no idea I packed such a punch. Anyway, with the pain came inspiration. A constitutional crisis. It's amazing what you think about when seeing stars.

This story is simpler than usual for which I apologise. Normally there are several strands to one of these shorts but, in this case, I felt the story of the Battersea Barricades deserved to stand alone.

Rather like the people who were there.

This was a difficult story to write. I started off with all the confidence of complete ignorance and almost immediately discovered I'd bitten off more than I could chew and that I was going to need help. A lot of help.

I contacted the House of Commons about constitutional crises and the like, and they sent me a load of useful stuff. Thanks very much for that. All the political mistakes are mine.

I'd like to say that I've never fought in the streets – although I did start a very small but successful riot in Germany once – so I just had to sit and look out of the window and dredge up a few colourful memories. All the rioting mistakes are mine.

I have been on a narrow boat and I have chatted with the owner. All the riparian mistakes are mine.

I have studied locks and their mechanism and I have spoken to a lockkeeper. Many thanks to Jason from the Canal and River Trust. All the mistakes concerning locks and their operations are mine.

I did study maps on the layout of the Thames and the possible route to London from Gloucester. All the cartography mistakes are mine.

Thanks to Phillip Dawson, Risk Management Operations Ltd, for his advice on helicopter gunships and firepower. I listened very carefully and then went my own way. All the military mistakes are mine.

Thanks to the people at the Dick Whittington for permission to use their pub in this story. To lessen any unnecessary anxiety on the part of the reader – it is still standing.

I've never stolen a bike but I did have mine stolen as a child and I reckoned that was close enough.

I have walked across Chelsea Bridge many times. Many of you will be aware of my love affair with Battersea Power Station. I couldn't resist dragging it into yet another story. Sorry.

Published by Accent Press Ltd 2018

ISBN 9781635969375

Copyright © Jodi Taylor 2018

The right of Jodi Taylor to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by the author in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The story contained within this book is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers:

Accent Press Ltd
Octavo House
West Bute Street
Cardiff
CF10 5LJ



For more information about Jodi Taylor
and other Accent Press titles
please visit
www.accentpress.co.uk